

Disabled vet tells Soldiers to focus on their abilities

Greater emphasis placed on ensuring full employment

By John A. Emmert
Army News Service

WASHINGTON — Soldiers can become disabled at any time and instantly face great challenges, one who knows told a crowd in the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes Oct. 19.

Spc. Nicola Harvey related her experiences as a Soldier who became disabled in Iraq as she participated in the Army's 2004 Disability Employment Awareness Month event. The program was sponsored by the Army's Office of the Administrative Assistant, Equal Employment Opportunity.

The theme of the program was "You're hired! Success knows no limitations." Speakers urged those in attendance to focus on the abilities of potential employees, not their disabilities.

Harvey was deployed to Iraq with the New Jersey National Guard's 253rd Transportation Company when she was injured Aug. 5, 2003, in Baugi. An explosion shattered her truck's windshield and filled the cabin with debris.

Her injuries included cuts on her body, a cut cornea and glass fragments in her eyes, she said. She learned a month later that pieces of glass will remain in her eyes, and she received the Purple Heart Jan. 28.

Harvey said she was one of the lucky few who came home right away and found a job. A lot of the Soldiers coming home are having problems, she said, and don't know about the programs available to them.

"Companies that include people with disabilities in their diversity programs increase their competitive advantage," said guest speaker Jody Wildy, diversity program manager, Office of Disability Employment Policy, U.S. Department of Labor.

When workers with disabilities are hired, "employers gain a qualified, stable and diverse workforce, people with disabilities get jobs, and society saves money that previously funded public benefits and services for people with disabilities," said Wildy, who lost her legs in a drunk driving accident.

The healthcare, manufacturing and construction industries are already reporting difficulty finding skilled workers, she said.

Workers with disabilities represent a large pool of potential applicants, said Sheila Young, disability program manager, Directorate of Equal Employment Opportunity.

Unfortunately, a large number of individuals with disabilities are unemployed or underemployed despite their desires



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Jody Wildy lost both legs above her knees after a 1991 car accident caused by a drunk driver. She has been working in the disability field for 12 years.

On the Net

- More information on Veteran's Disability Resources can be found at www.va.gov.
- Job Accommodations Network, the ADA and small businesses information is available at www.jan.wvu.edu.
- For the Employment Assistance Referral Network, visit www.earn-works.com.
- Disability information available throughout the federal government can be found at www.disabilityinfo.gov.

to work and make a contribution, Wildy said. People with disabilities still experience discrimination.

The most difficult barrier to overcome, aside from the physical and systemic barriers, is the attitudes people carry regarding people with disabilities, Wildy said. People think they know what is best for people with disabilities and what they can and can't do.

"When people look at me, they look at what I can't do rather than what I can do," said Wildy.

If she and a person without a disability both applied for the same position and both applicants have the same experi-

ence, whom do you think they are going to hire, asked Wildy. They are going to hire the person without the disabilities because of silly mindsets like disabled people are more prone to accidents or that they will cost more. In fact, it costs less than \$500 to provide an accommodation for a person with a disability.

Pentagon Chaplain Col. Ralph Benson summed up the feeling and general message of the program during the ceremony's invocation. He said it is important to celebrate our physical limitations and see in our disabilities the power of hope and determination that can be instilled in a workplace and a community that respects each person for the depth of their character and not blinded by the handicap that can be seen.

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Program allows disabled veterans military careers

By Donna Miles
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON — The Defense Department has long been a leader in providing employment opportunities to people with disabilities — but it's taken a major step forward by allowing disabled veterans to remain in the military if they want to and can continue to perform, DOD's disability program manager said here Oct. 13.

As DOD observes National Disability Employment Month, this year's theme, "You're Hired! Success Knows No Limitations!" takes on particular relevance for service members wounded during the war on terror, Judy Gilliom said during an interview with the Pentagon Channel.

Gilliom said service members with disabling injuries used to be automatically turned over to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"Now there is much more interest at the very highest levels in keeping anyone who wants to remain in the service as an active-duty member," she said. "And there are some very striking examples of how that has been done."

"With advances in medicine, technology and rehabilitation techniques, we are making every attempt to return willing service members back to duty," said Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness David S. C. Chu. "We are increasing that capability with advances in amputee care, new prosthetic devices, and the new Advanced Amputee Training Center established at Walter Reed (Army Medical Center)."

President Bush shared this new vision in December during a visit to wounded

troops at Walter Reed. "Americans would be surprised to learn that a grievous injury, such as the loss of a limb, no longer means forced discharge," the president told the Soldiers.

"In other words, the medical care is so good and the recovery process is so technologically advanced, that people are no longer forced out of the military," Bush said. "When we're talking about forced discharge, we're talking about another age and another Army."

Marine Corps Sgt. Chris Chandler is an example of that new age and new military. Three months into his deployment to Afghanistan in 2001, Chandler stepped on a landmine, which blew off his left foot and lower leg.

But the 23-year-old Marine said he never entertained the idea of a medical retirement.

"I never considered it for a second," he told a reporter from The Bayonet newspaper at Fort Benning, Ga. "Before I could even start to feel sorry for myself, there were people who'd lost their legs who came to talk to me and tell me I could do it."

Last December, Chandler proved them right, becoming the first service member with a prosthetic limb to graduate from the Army's Airborne School at Fort Benning.

Chu called the spirit of these and other wounded service members intent on remaining in the military "an enormous tribute to America's all-volunteer force." Gilliom said examples like these — once almost unheard of — are occurring with increasing frequency as the military looks beyond traditional conceived notions about what disabled service members can and can't do.

Amputee to continue his military career

By Samantha L. Quigley
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON — Army Sgt. Brian Wilhelm was near Balad, Iraq, on a logistics mission in early October 2003 when his unit was ambushed. He was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade through the lower left leg.

Wilhelm spent a couple of days at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany before being transferred to Walter Reed Army Medical Center here. He said he's had lots of support from his family, including his wife, also in the Army, and his 13-month-old daughter, born just before he was injured.

The RPG tore out his calf muscle and caused multiple fractures to the tibia and fibula.

While repairing the leg was possible, Wilhelm said he didn't want to wait and hope that surgery would get him moving normally again.

He ultimately made the decision to have the leg amputated.

"I felt I could recover faster as an amputee and be able to move on with life more normally as an amputee than I would have been by trying to ... kind of

feel bad for myself and hope maybe a miracle surgery would do it," he said. "I knew (amputation) would work for sure and went with that."

The attitude of making the best out of every situation is part of being a Soldier, he said.

You can feel bad for yourself and let your surroundings dictate your attitude, or you can take control of your situation and turn it into a positive.

Wilhelm, an infantryman with the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, from Fort Carson, Colo., would like to do just that. He hopes to remain on active duty as an infantryman and even get back to leading Soldiers in Iraq eventually.

This, he thinks, is completely possible. He is competitive physically: meeting Army fitness standards, running two miles in just over 14 minutes, completing a five-mile run in less than 40 minutes, and completing road marches.

Wilhelm also is looking to early summer 2005, when he hopes to head to Fort Lewis, with the Army's World Class Athlete Program to start training for the 2008 Paralympics.